

BYZANTINE AND SASANIAN  
TRADE RELATIONS WITH  
NORTHEASTERN RUSSIA

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THE history of the steppes of southern Russia has been viewed as a series of invasions of nomads from the east who displaced their predecessors, either annihilating them, absorbing them, or forcing them to move westward. Until the fourth century A.D. southern Russia was dominated by Iranian-speaking peoples, first by those generally called Scythians by classical authors, and then by the Sarmatians with many divisions such as the Alans, the Roxalani, and others. After the Hunnic invasions the Turkic period of steppe history begins, for the interlude of the Goths and the movement of the Finno-Ugrian Magyars to the west were mere episodes in the overall change in the history of the area.<sup>1</sup> With the coming of Turkic-speaking peoples, however, the Iranians were not all displaced, as were the Alans who moved to the Caucasus area. Other Iranians who remained in settlements in south Russia continued to trade and to spread their culture on all sides. It is the contention of this brief paper that the Iranians in the towns of south Russia acted as middlemen in the trade between the Sasanian empire in the south and the Ugrian-speaking peoples of northern Russia. The greater success of Sasanian trade (and, possibly, of diplomacy), as opposed to the Byzantine, with the peoples of the north may have been the result of the efforts of the Iranian kinsmen of the Sasanians in south Russia. That the Sasanians were indeed more successful in trade than were the Byzantines is indicated by the much larger number of Sasanian silver plates than of Byzantine objects found in the Perm and Kama regions. Let us examine this area and adjoining regions, first to determine generally what has been found and second to interpret the material remains.

The fact that almost all Sasanian coins discovered in Scandinavia or in Russia have been found in hoards together with Islamic coins has led many scholars to assume that trade between Iran and eastern and northern Europe developed only after the establishment of the 'Abbāsid caliphate in the Near East. Although most evidence points to a great increase of trade in this period, especially with the Viking expansion, there are indications that such trade existed in pre-Islamic times. The most significant evidence of early trade relations between the Kama-Perm regions of northeastern Russia and pre-Islamic Iran is the large number of Sasanian silver bowls of the fifth to eighth centuries, whereas the comparatively few earlier silver bowls are found only in south Russia, in the Crimea or Saratov regions.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that finds of Byzantine silver vessels parallel the Sasanian, although on a smaller scale and with a wider distribution. We shall discuss this below. General archaeological evi-

<sup>1</sup> It must be emphasized that the words "Turkic" and "Iranian" refer only to people whose rulers or the mass of whose population spoke a Turkic or an Iranian language. We know that tribes and peoples in eastern Europe and Central Asia were highly mixed and under various cultural influences from the centers of civilization. We must use some general designations for lack of satisfactory terms, but the reader should heed the *caveats* regarding the history of the peoples of this vast area.

<sup>2</sup> See V. V. Kropotkin, *Ékonomičeskie svjazi vostočnoj Evropy v 1 tysjačelietii našej éry* (Moscow, 1967), 75. The existence of many Iranian loan words in Finnish, Mordwin, and other Ugrian languages is additional evidence of contact, but they cannot be discussed here.

dence of contacts is less convincing because of the difficulty of dating the strata, although one may presume that trading relations between north and south existed at this time, since there is plenty of evidence from both an earlier (Scythian-Bosporan kingdom) and a later (ʿAbbāsid) period. Contacts may have been broken in periods of invasion of the steppes of south Russia or because of internal problems, but these breaks may be viewed merely as interruptions throughout a long period of continuity—as exceptions rather than the norm. The question which we ask is, why do silver bowls appear in great numbers in the Kama-Perm area, dating from the period of the last century of the Sasanian empire into Islamic times? Obviously the question has two parts: why did the people of the Kama-Perm regions want silver, and why did the Sasanians supply it?

The answer seems simple; the silver plates were small objects of great value which could be carried easily by merchants and were a good investment for the Ugrian-speaking peoples, since they could exchange them with the nomads of the steppes, silver always having been the currency of nomads. The Kama-Perm peoples could trade fish, hides, wax, honey, and amber for the plates—and especially furs, which were greatly prized in Iran though not so greatly in Byzantium.<sup>3</sup> Another luxury article from the north was walrus ivory, and even mammoth ivory, more highly valued in the south than elephant ivory for knife handles and other decorative uses.<sup>4</sup> The motives for trade were therefore present but the same motives would have existed elsewhere, where no silver objects have been found. Furthermore, the great number of silver objects in the Kama-Perm regions was not just a discovery of modern archaeologists; the old Russian chronicles frequently mention “silver from beyond the Kama,” or Kama silver, which indicates that the people who lived there were well known for their love and hoarding of silver.<sup>5</sup> The key to the problem of the large quantity of silver in the Kama area was provided by Russian ethnographers of the nineteenth century, who investigated the religious practices of the forest peoples who were not Christians, and also discovered corroboration of their ethnological finds in the old Scandinavian sagas. In brief, silver plates and other silver objects were used as part of the religious cult of the people who inhabited this area.<sup>6</sup> It is outside the scope of this paper and of the competence of its author to discuss the religious practices of the inhabitants of the Kama-Perm regions, but the reason for the accumulation there of silver objects is clear, and we may now turn to the other end of the trade route, to the original home of the silver plates.

We have already mentioned the articles of trade sought by Iranians, and we need not investigate the fur trade or why the furs were so highly prized in Iran—

<sup>3</sup> Much has been written on the fur trade, but for an account of the value of furs for the Persians later, see G. Jacob, *Welche Handelsartikel bezogen die Araber des Mittelalters aus den nordisch-baltischen Ländern?* (Berlin, 1891), 19, 23.

<sup>4</sup> S. Cammann, “Carvings in Walrus Ivory,” *The University Museum Bulletin*, Pennsylvania University, 18, No. 3 (1954), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. R. N. Frye, “Historical Notes on Sasanian and Byzantine Silver,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 1 (Shiraz, 1969), 39.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. O. N. Bader and A. P. Smirnov, “*Serebro Zakamskoe*” *pervyx vekov našej èry* (Moscow, 1954), 23–24, and A. P. Smirnov, *Novaja Naxodka Vostochnogo Serebra v Priural’e* (Moscow, 1957), 29–31.

it is, of course, cold on the Iranian plateau in the winter.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, many people forget that in the past amber was not merely employed for manufacturing decorative ornaments but was also widely used in medicine. Thus, on the basis of commerce alone there was good reason for the Sasanians to trade with the north. Another reason, I believe, existed for the export of silver to the north; this can be found in diplomacy. One of the policies of Kavād and his son and successor Chosroes I seems to have been the development of the Caspian provinces and Gurgān to the east of the Caspian Sea. The important seaport of Abaskūn was reportedly founded by Kavād.<sup>8</sup> Later, under Chosroes, the great wall of Gurgān (*hodie* Kızıl Yılan, "the red snake") was built to protect the province from raids of the nomads. Limited space prevents discussion here of the many problems related to the nomads who threatened the northern borders of the Sasanian empire both to the east and to the west of the Caspian Sea. The identification of Šul/Chūr, the rise of the Khazars, and other problems are not directly pertinent to our subject. Suffice it to say that all of the northern borders of the empire were threatened by Turkic-speaking peoples or their allies, and Chosroes I was very busy in the Transcaucasus region including Derbend, and in Gurgān to the east of the Caspian, seeking to defend Iran against her northern foes as well as to expand his territories. Just as the Romans and especially the Byzantines had sought allies in the steppes of south Russia against the nomadic foes threatening their borders, so did the Sasanians seek support in lands to the north against enemies who would invade their empire. Again, just as the cities of the Crimea and Azov Sea, once Greek, provided a base for Byzantine diplomatic and commercial activities, so did the Iranian traders and settlements in south Russia provide contacts for Sasanian diplomatic and commercial plans. The cities of the northern Black Sea littoral, however, were far more important to Constantinople, and their ties with Byzantium were more significant to them than were the mutual relations between Sasanians and Iranians of south Russia. Furthermore, the Iranians of south Russia depended more on trade with their neighbors than on contacts with the Sasanians to the south. I suggest that the Sasanians knew little if anything about the peoples of north Russia; it was the merchants in south Russia who acted as middlemen between Sasanian Iran and the north, for it was surely in their commercial interest to promote exchanges.

When we turn to the fewer Byzantine silver plates and bowls found in the Kama region, the variety of subjects decorating them is not as striking as is their date, nor is the number found here surprising when compared with the number found in the rest of Russia. L. A. Matsulevich studied their decoration, but *inter alia* he noted that at least twenty-five Byzantine silver plates and bowls had been found in the Kama region—almost twice as many as those discovered elsewhere in Russia. More important still, from my point of view, he determined

<sup>7</sup> Parthian furs are mentioned in the *Codex Justinianus*, Digest XXXIX. iv.16. Cf. S. Wikander, "A Central Asian Loanword in the Arthasāstra," *Pratidānam, Festschrift F. B. J. Kuiper* (The Hague, 1968), 274.

<sup>8</sup> M. A. F. Mehren, *Cosmographie de Dimichqui*, Arabic Text (St. Petersburg, 1866), 226; trans. (Copenhagen, 1874), 314.

that almost all of the objects dated from the end of the sixth and the seventh century and were probably shipped directly to the Kama region where they were promptly buried.<sup>9</sup> This information corresponds to that furnished by the Sasanian silver discovered in the Kama area, although the dating of "Sasanian style" silver plates is more difficult than that of their Byzantine counterparts. A control is provided by a hoard of Byzantine coins of Heraclius found in a Sasanian bowl in the village of Bartym in 1950.<sup>10</sup> Other indices, such as inscriptions on the objects, only confirm the dating of most of both Byzantine and Sasanian silver objects to the end of the sixth and through the seventh century. The picture is clear, for it remarkably coincides with the evidence of silver coins. We know that Heraclius minted a great amount of silver *miliaresia* or hexagrams for the Persian wars. These are found in considerable quantities in Transcaucasia; though in Russia only in the Kama region, with a scattering north of the Caucasus but not in other parts of European Russia.<sup>11</sup> Regarding Transcaucasia, the monetary situation was complicated, but in general one could say that the Byzantine gold *solidus* was the basis of the money economy of Lazica, on the Black Sea coast, whereas in Georgia both Byzantine and Sasanian coins circulated, and in Arrān (Albania) and Armenia the Sasanian *dirhams* dominated the market. It may be concluded that the end of the sixth and most of the seventh century saw an expansion of both Byzantine and Sasanian contacts with the north; also that the people of the Kama region at this time imported silver in great quantities. I have already mentioned the importance of silver objects in the cult of the local people, but it can hardly be assumed that this was an innovation in the sixth century, for writers in the nineteenth mention as still current the custom of dedicating silver objects to deities and spirits of the pagan tribes. We may conclude, therefore, that both the Byzantines and the Sasanian Persians in the sixth century "discovered" the north. One might also say that the peoples of the Kama "discovered" the south in this period, together with the source of silver objects, either from Byzantium or from Iran. Fortunately, the beginnings of trade in the Kama area have been investigated by V. L. Yanin, who concluded that this area and the region along the Ural mountains were the first corners of eastern Europe to be opened to trade with the East, since they had already assumed this role in the sixth century.<sup>12</sup> Archaeologists tell us that the first towns in eastern Europe were located in northeastern Russia. On the Kama River towns were built long before the rise of Kiev or Novgorod. The fascinating vistas opened by the finds of silver objects and coins in northeastern Russia, added to archaeological excavations, will enable us to reconstruct a movement to the south of the inhabitants of this area in the aftermath of the Hunnic invasions, when the Goths, Alans, and others evacuated south Russia leaving a vacuum. It is not my purpose, nor indeed my competence, to discuss problems

<sup>9</sup> For the best summary (with a French résumé), see his article "Vizantiiskii Antik a Prikam'e," *Materialy i Issledovaniia po Arxeologii SSSR*, 1 (Moscow, 1940), 139–58, esp. 143–45.

<sup>10</sup> V. V. Kropotkin, *Klady Vizantijskix Monet na territorii SSSR*, *Arxeologija SSSR*, E 4–4 (Moscow, 1962), 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 50, and D. G. Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaja Numismatika* (Moscow, 1955), 47.

<sup>12</sup> V. L. Janin, *Denezno-vesovye Sistemy russkogo srednevekovija* (Moscow, 1956), 85.

of the history of Russia, but the silver finds fit well with the events of that history, and also with the history of Byzantium and Iran.

When we remember that at the end of the sixth century the trade of Byzantium with India shifted from Mesopotamia to the Red Sea and west Arabian routes,<sup>13</sup> and recall that in 568 a Turkish mission arrived in Constantinople to establish trade contacts north of the Caspian Sea, to be followed by the famous embassy of Zemarchos (Menander Protector, frags. 19–22), the strategy of Byzantine diplomacy becomes apparent. It was matched by the Sasanian occupation of Yemen after 570, and one should not forget the attempts of Chosroes I at expansion in Lazica in Transcaucasia and against the Hephtalites in the northeast. The role of the peoples of northeastern Russia in the diplomatic and commercial activities of the two great powers was small, probably decidedly secondary, and managed through the intervention of middlemen to the south. One could not say that these peoples played any decisive role in the drama of conflict between Byzantium and Sasanian Iran. On the other hand, they did play a small part in the great struggle, and undoubtedly provided a background for the later Viking expansion down the Volga River. The enigma of the Kama silver—for it was rife with problems—appears to be a phenomenon explicable by the internal history and customs of the native people of the Kama as well as by the commercial and diplomatic rivalry of the Byzantines and the Sasanians in the sixth century A.D.

In addition, it should be noted that almost all the Sasanian silver vessels found in Iran—and these are far fewer than those found in northeastern Russia—come from the Caspian provinces. Travel was easier across the Caspian Sea to the north than across the rugged Elburz mountains to the south. Furthermore, the last refuge of Sasanian traditions in Iran was in the mountains of the Caspian provinces. Probably many “Sasanian” plates will in future be assigned to the craftsmen of the numerous petty princes of the Caspian provinces in Islamic times, who, more than was the case elsewhere on the plateau, not only clung tenaciously to the past but possessed the independence, wealth, and strength to order such plates copied and produced. The discovery of Byzantine silver spoons and plates in this region is not surprising, but belongs to another story of Byzantine-Iranian trade relations.

<sup>13</sup> Discussed by I. Kavar in “The Arabs in the Peace Treaty of A.D. 561,” *Arabica*, 3 (1956), 184.